

Skid Row in Houston

By Lt. Robert Ellers

I've had several interesting and unforgettable experiences in the great, and somewhat "peculiar," state of Texas, while working my way through training en route to the fleet. But few experiences can rival the one that involved a beat-up TH-57 Jet Ranger with a pink door, the U.S. Army air cavalry,



"Ninety gallons? No problem..."

and an unassuming Indian fueling technician who only was trying to do exactly as he was told.

I had been alternating between the copilot's seat and the rear cabin of our TH-57 all day as we tried to complete our cross-country flight from NAS Whiting Field to San Antonio, Texas. Our originally filed destination had been Washington, D.C., but the weather was so poor along the eastern seaboard any attempt to make D.C. would have been nearly impossible. So, after a quick refile and a haphazard collection of new charts, we headed west, through the dense fog surrounding Pensacola into clearer skies over Alabama, Mississippi and Louisiana. We were conservative with our fuel because of strong headwinds along the entire route. We decided

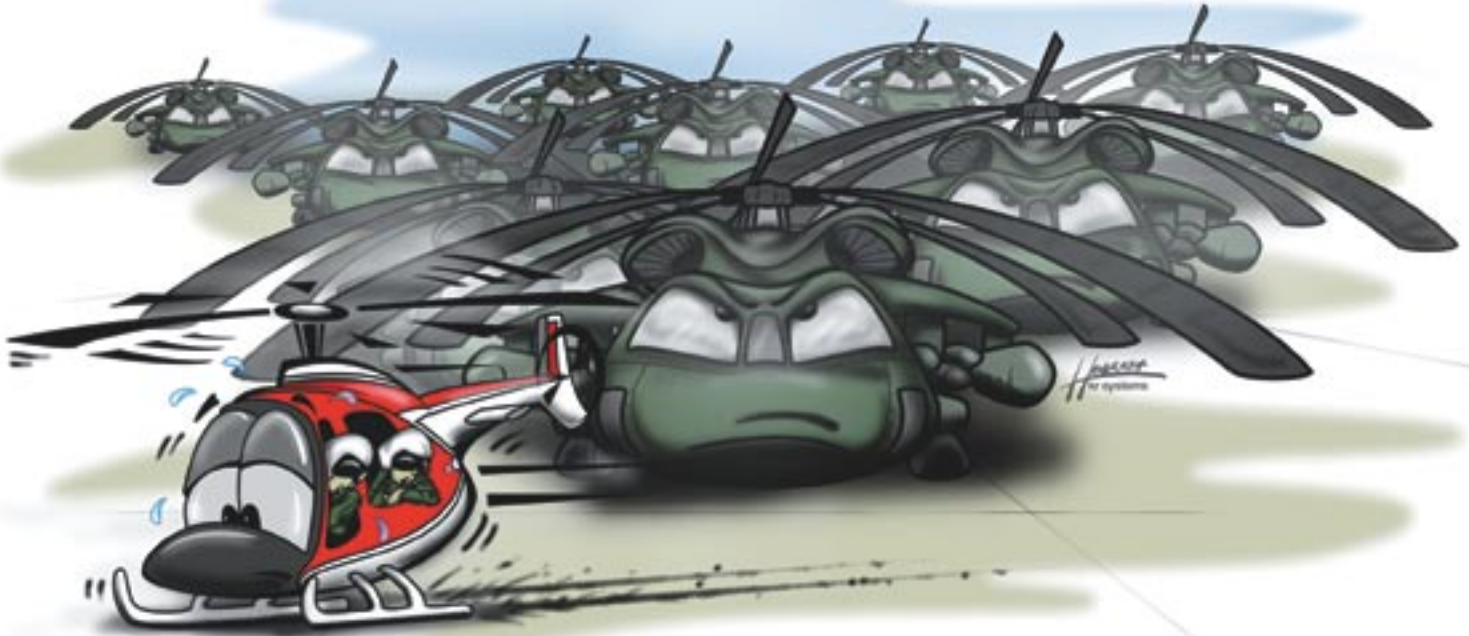
to make a quick fuel stop at a small airfield just northeast of Houston, called David Wayne Hooks Memorial Airport.

As we set up for landing at the small helipad adjacent to the operations office, we saw a long line of Army helicopters in what appeared to be an entire squadron of the air cavalry. A half-dozen Blackhawks and twice as many heavily armed Kiowa scouts indicated right away we would have a long wait for lunch. We also would have heavy competition afterward for a takeoff clearance—if we were to finish our trip before sunset.

Compared to the tactical forest-green paint schemes of the Army choppers and the bristling armament hanging from the air cav's external-weapons stations, our little orange and white jet ranger must have seemed downright laughable. We flew aviation's answer to the 1970's era Gremlin: the bad paint scheme and all of the cheap temporary fixes that make a machine look unworthy of safe operation. Regardless, our clown car needed fuel just as surely as did the Army helos, and our money was just as good. The bearded fueling technician, with a full turban and heavily accented English, approached our crew and politely asked how much fuel we would like. With our minds already on lunch and thinking of the pride we would have to swallow while eating with the air cavalry, our instructor nonchalantly replied we would take 90 gallons.

"Ninety gallons?" responded the fueller with wide eyes. "OK."

Lunch went off much more comfortably than we'd anticipated. We even had a few conversations with the Army bubbas about their pin-clad Stetson hats and their operating routine in and around Texas. We compared stories



about Army and Navy flight school and shared some self-deprecating humor about our unique ways of doing things. Managing to finish our meals in record time—to get a head start on the olive-drab fleet of helicopters dwarfing our jet ranger—we hurried out of the dining room, paid our fuel bill, and ran through our preflight under the curious eyes and amused smirks of the Kiowa pilots. After religiously checking every nook and cranny of our aging trainer in true flight-school fashion, I took my position as the backseater and watched as my fellow student flicked on the battery switch and stared incredulously at the fuel gauge.

To his horror, the needle was pegged well beyond the clearly taped max-fuel indicator, and we wondered just how full the fuel bladders could be. Unfortunately, and this is where the moral of the story comes into play, we couldn't recall exactly how much fuel we had remaining upon landing. But, we guessed it was somewhere around 30 gallons, which led us to the next question. Calling the fueling technician over to the pilot-side door, the instructor asked politely, "How much fuel did you give us?"

The man answered with his heavy accent,

"Ninety gallons, like you asked."

Quickly realizing the mistake in not specifying we required 90 *total* gallons, as opposed to 90 gallons in *addition* to what we already had, my instructor soberly nodded his head, thanked the man in the turban, and slowly closed the cockpit door. We realized we were in a pickle and knew how much embarrassment would ensue from most of the remedies that obviously presented themselves.

We could (1) attempt to defuel, which was unlikely with the equipment available, (2) burn down fuel by sitting on the deck for 45 minutes or more, which would make us look foolish in front of our new friends, or, (3) try an actual max-gross-weight takeoff and hope we had enough torque to clear the trees at the end of the runway. Of course, all of these options would be tried in front of a full audience. Dozens of air-cavalry pilots were standing idly on the taxiway in front of their mean, green, fighting machines, with their Stetsons resting atop their balding foreheads and their hands resting patiently on their hips. Not a good setup for any one of our choices. But, to save face and maybe to impress a few of our

bystanders in the process, we opted for the max-gross-weight takeoff.

Droning over the ICS like the voice of my conscience was my instructor's voice as he brought the twist grip to full open, "This never leaves this cockpit, understand?"

In fact, the earphones in my helmet never ceased to chatter as my instructor continually talked himself through the slow application of power that brought the strained jet ranger into what couldn't have been any more than a six-inch hover over the tarmac—with maximum torque indicating clearly on the instrument panel.

This sight clearly piqued the interest of our Army observers as the tiny helicopter began to creep painstakingly forward at a snail's pace. We didn't waste a single bit of forward momentum in our quest to reach translational lift before slamming back into the runway. Steadily, our speed began to increase from a standstill to 10 knots, 15 knots, and 20 knots, all the while skimming the deck at a height of mere inches.

Just as I began to be astonished by my instructor's skills and opened my mouth to compliment him on his flying, the skids contacted the runway—first, only briefly, producing a rough and scratchy bounce. But the brief loss of momentum quickly brought both skids into full contact with the tarmac, resulting in a loud screech that showered sparks behind the aircraft and two, deep, black skid marks.

I felt sensory overload coming on from the constant

talking in my helmet, the howl of the skids, and the light show from the sparks and wondered if our valiant effort was doomed to failure. Surprisingly, though, we continued to gain speed. The skids once again left the runway, allowing the tiny aircraft to bounce its way higher and higher into sustained forward flight. Just before the crest of trees awaiting our fiery finale at the departure end, we burst into the sky in one final, glorious leap.

As we turned downwind for our departure from the confines of the field, I glanced back at the taxiway to see the air cavalry tossing their hats into the air and applauding with loud cheers at our foolhardy but successful attempt to play the odds against physics.

In hindsight, which we all know is 20/20, the better option would have been to burn down our fuel on the helipad and accept the inconvenient delay that was the result of our own poor communication with the fueler. In this instance, we came out unscathed and provided some unexpected entertainment to our air-cavalry peers. But, we pushed dangerously close to the aircraft limits trying to save time and face. Had we not had the necessary winds, or perhaps a less experienced aviator at the controls, our decision could have wound up as a mishap report, rather than an *Approach* article.

Never play the odds with fuel or weight limitations, and make sure your priorities are straight. Saving face or impressing peers is never worth the risk of destroying an aircraft and losing a crew. 🦅

Lt. Eilers flies with HS-14.

